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SUBJECT: CHAPLAINS' VISIT SPURS INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND BETTER
UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAM IN AMERICA

11. (SBU) Summary. The visit of three U.S. military chaplains to Mali launched useful discussions with military and civilian leaders that emphasized the positive role of religion in America and

countered impressions held by some that the United States was anti-Muslim. The chaplains, including the Command Chaplains for EUCOM and AFRICOM and a Community Life Chaplain (and Imam) assigned to Heidelberg, toured Mali from October 22 to October 26 to participate in interfaith and bilateral dialogue. The inclusion of an Imam allowed outreach efforts at venues beyond those normally used by the Embassy, including participation at Bamako's Grand Mosque's Friday prayers, visits to other mosques, and an interview on Mali's leading Islamic-source radio station. The response of Malian interlocutors was universally positive, with some noting that the visit changed their perception of the war on terror and how America views Muslims. End Summary.

Christian and Muslim on a Single Mission

12. (SBU) On October 22, Navy Captain Mark Tidd, EUCOM Command Chaplain; Army Colonel David Colwell, recently designated as AFRICOM Command Chaplain; and Army Major Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad, currently assigned as an Army Family Life Chaplain and Imam in Heidelberg, visited civilian and military leaders in Mali to promote interfaith and bilateral dialogue, and counter perceptions that the United States was "anti-Muslim."

Men of the Cloth Speaking Together

13. (SBU) The Chaplains met with a variety of Islamic leaders in Bamako, Segou, Djenne and Mopti. The group was widely welcomed in mosques and meetings halls. At the Grande Mosque in Mopti, a group of over 80 people waited more than an hour after prayers for a chance to speak with the Chaplains. Religious leaders at each stop stressed the tolerance of Malians and their happiness at receiving Christian, and especially a Muslim, clergy from the U.S. Many Malians expressed surprise that Christian and Muslim leaders were serving side-by-side in uniform.

14. (SBU) Malian Muslim and Christian leaders used the meetings to proudly assert the Malian tradition of nondiscrimination and tolerance, stressing that families often intermarried, that many families celebrated both Ramadan and Christmas, and that ethnic or religious disputes rarely, if ever, escalate to violence.

15. (SBU) The week culminated when all three Chaplains, featuring Chaplain Muhammad, appeared on Bamako's Islamic Council radio station. The questions focused on Chaplain Muhammad's experiences as a Muslim in the U.S. and the Christian chaplains' views on religious tolerance. The broadcast, conducted in Bambara through a translator, reached a large part of the greater Bamako region and was subsequently rebroadcast on other Islamic radio stations in Mali.

Ministering to Those in Uniform

¶17. (SBU) The group met with Colonel Satigui Sidibe Chief of Social Services for the Malian Armed Forces, and with military commanders in Segou and Mopti, to discuss both the role of chaplains in the American Armed Forces and how the Malian Armed Forces addressed the social and spiritual needs of its troops.

¶18. (SBU) Sidibe said the Malian military has recently come to realize the importance of providing social services to those serving in uniform, establishing his division only in 2006. Sidibe said his unit received very limited training in Morocco, and would welcome further visits and/or training opportunities to address the provisions of morale and social services. Officers in the field were equally curious about the role of Chaplains in the U.S. Military, were very supportive of the visit, and encouraged the Embassy to schedule similar visits in the future.

¶19. (SBU) Comment. The impact of the visit exceeded expectations. The combination of individuals with both a religious and military background gave the visitors access to and credibility with audiences that would not normally attend other Embassy outreach events. Malians noted time and again that the presence of Muslim and Christian clergy, in uniform, together at the same table, illustrated the tolerance and respect for religion of the people, and more importantly, government of the U.S. - a message difficult to sell when considering the stream of contrary stories from the international media. The visit also set the groundwork for additional contacts between the Malian Army Social Services organization, the Chaplain's Corps and the Embassy.

McCulley